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SORTING THEM OUT¹

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The results of my first theme assignment had just come in. I have never attacked any set of themes, I have seldom made a theme assignment without a sense of high adventure; but I have never since been so imminently lost in the wilderness as when I skimmed that first set of themes. There were only seventy to eighty, and I was proud of the subject: a personal letter (confidential if the writers wished), telling me all they were willing to about themselves—their likes, hates, difficulties, diversions, and ambitions. They had responded delightfully, and a single hasty reading made me feel better acquainted than weeks of shy oral response could have done. But the form!

I was not unprepared. I had had a most excellent course in preparation. A card catalogue was filled out in readiness: pupil's name, theme date, subject, grade for form and grade for mechanics, with columns to record incomplete sentences, comma-blunder sentences, misspellings, apostrophes, verb errors, and the rest. The preparedness was all that saved me. But even so, I had failed to grasp, in spite of various psychologies of subject-matter and the subjects who were to be subjected to it, quite how individual pupils' differences could be in this one matter of mechanics. I learned for the first time that an ingenious young mind can devise as many as five spellings for the same word on a single page. In all my unimaginative, docile school career I had not dreamed of such variations of monotonous conventions in spelling. By the time I had read the set of themes twice, lifetime habits were upset and I was feverishly searching the dictionary for words I had been born knowing. I have not again been able to spell with my original spontaneity. And spelling was only a small shovelful in the

¹ The paper refers to an earlier high-school experience.

landslide which swept me. I gave up grading at once, in sheer cowardice. The poorest Senior letters fell below the best Freshman ones; the Juniors' were scarcely a shade better in form than the Sophomores'.

I tried reading the themes aloud, with encouraging results. They did not sound as they looked. I began also to discover how reasonable, and in some cases, how consistent they were. Mark, who spelled *boat* correctly, extended the knowledge to *boath*. In later themes he never missed *boast*, *coast*, *roast*, and *toast*, but he also achieved *poast* and *ghoast*. Mark, a Freshman at eighteen, was used to being the school "joke" in many things besides English, but I discovered soon that, if read anonymously in class, his themes about the farm, his dog, hunting possums, and trapping skunks were usually popular. His classmates sometimes received them with an appreciation of literary value which I failed to discern. In a theme of signs of spring, I was diverted from the balmy atmosphere he strove to produce, by impressions of gusty weather, when I read, "The sky is no longer such a *pail blew*." It was not his fault that our language is illogical.

Most of that year was given to groping for reasons. I discovered why *strike* should be spelled *strick*, when I happened to find this wrong form of the present on a line above the past tense spelled correctly—*struck*. The same pupil wrote an exposition on "howing" potatoes. Had she had Mark's sense of consistency, she would have written "howing potatows." The groping did disclose certain wrong forms common to many. A degree of order was evolving in my bewilderment, when I found in the composition text which had been thrust upon me, a convenient chapter summarizing certain "rules for correctness." The use of question marks was explained, and apostrophes were mentioned. Here was authority to back my advice. Incidental counsel about punctuation, while received with courteous appreciation, had borne little fruit in the practice of Freshmen. I had tried the dictionary method in spelling, but when Sam, Mark, and Jane tried to verify words in which they had all but the initial letter wrong, and were uncertain whether that was *C*, *K*, or *Ch*, the abridged dictionary became a huge, uncharted volume. Among these rules for correctness were

included several pages on spelling. The first rule read: "Words of one syllable or accented on the last syllable, ending in a single consonant, preceded by a single vowel, usually double the final consonant before adding a suffix beginning with a vowel." There followed a list of exceptions. Ignoring these, I tested the formula, proved each item necessary if it were to work, drew up a list of examples from the children's themes, and commanded the whole learned by heart—no, hardly by heart nor even by head, but by tongue—and all the tongues got twisted. There was also a rule about dropping final *e*'s before certain suffixes, and converses to each rule. I assign the four at once. (I knew better, but I was rule-hungry.) Before this I had been correcting such errors as *geling*, *puting*, *prefering*, *makeing*, *takeing*, *comeing*, *loseing* (or oftener, *looseing*). The rest of the year I had to struggle with *bakking*, *takking*, *curring*, and *comming*. The two processes of doubling final consonants under certain complex conditions, and dropping silent *e*'s under other conditions, were absorbed into a single process. An editorial I had once read on "The Need of Fool-Proof Textbooks," seemed to fit the case; but the bibliography of such texts is not large. By patience, many of the children succeeded in extricating themselves from the tangle, but a few of the slower ones held with fearful tenacity to what they had learned only by difficult application.

In original verb forms I found almost equal variety, and greater determination in holding habits long established. Many never indicated any change in any of the forms of regular verbs. Insistence on the necessity of adding *d* or *ed*, produced the forms, "was borned," "losted," "had drunked," "was spillen," "shaked," and the inevitable "attackted." In irregular verbs, "I done" was commonly accepted except by a few conscientious who said "I have did," "I seen," "he come," "she run," "have ate," and "had wrote," were never questioned. "Lie" and "lay" were already confused, so I had no chance to do it. Endeavors to straighten out the uses of these verbs brought the inspired response from one boy: "Oh, I see! Lie is when *you lay down*, and lay is when you *lie something down*." The distinction between *sit* and *set* was made clear by another pupil who wrote: "Sit is when you sit down; set

is when you set up"—"setting-up" exercises offered in proof. When I asked a little girl to give a sentence using the past tense of fly, she gave: "The fly was killed."

After futilely marking these errors all year I spent a class period conjugating the verbs I had found oftenest misused, and assigned a synopsis of the same verbs to be written out for the next day. In the morning an indignant Sophomore strode into my room to tell me he could not have his lesson ready: "I come up to tell you I have wrote seven pages of irregular verbs, and I haven't any more study periods before class!" I realized he "had wrote" seven pages too many.

There is one more phase to this confession, which is far from exhaustive. I was resolved not to kill interest and naturalness in writing for the sake of conventions. The double-grade, I had learned from others' experience, was one good solution; and it appealed to the children at once as "fair play." The numerator was an incentive for corrections. When I read themes aloud and asked for pupil judgment, their first opinion was given with no knowledge of wrong spellings or sentence division. Then these errors were listed, and the denominator-grade was promptly demanded by the class. But I made the upper grade too high at first, since an unfortunate limit of merit is suggested on the 100 per cent scale. Then, in a few cases, the 80/50 scheme was looked upon as a welcome relief from all personal worry over mechanics. Teacher marked errors and they corrected them. If mistakes were not specifically checked, correction became more difficult, but by the trial-and-error method the needed correction could usually be guessed. There seemed nothing to do except to lower the upper grade, explaining that greater carefulness in prevision was essential as we advanced in the term. The result was that instead of the steady progression upward which I had been sure a good teacher would achieve for all pupils, the grades of some descended, in some cases through the very effort to be careful, which resulted in inhibiting the expressiveness which I had been so hopeful of retaining.

When summer came, I drew a long breath and attacked the problem. I took, at Columbia, a course in "Principles of English Usage," hoping to see light; and it proved to be equally reforming

to grammar-ridden teachers and reviving to bewildered tyros. Relieved of the burden of much senseless hair-splitting, I worked out a line of attack, making what allowance I must for superimposed restrictions I knew I should have to meet.

We began our new year by a series of very simple lessons on the development of our language—using the lecture method more than I liked, as we lacked reference facilities. In the lower classes, the first class period was spent in trying to tell one another some interesting vacation experience without using words. We guessed at the topic of one another's pantomime narratives, discovering the need for words in order to obtain any satisfying idea. Then we began with the tiny valley where we were living, asking where the words we used so casually came from, traveling beyond the circle of hills to the larger community of the nation, and across the ocean to England, questioning about the building and expanding of our language there. In the older classes, many of the questions could be answered by the pupils themselves, as they recalled their history study. In this way historical reasons for the shifting in vocabulary, flexibility of syntax, irrationalities of spelling and idiom, became clear. Round figures of the proportions of people speaking English, Russian, German, French, Spanish, and Italian, in 1900, gave our own language unsuspected world-importance. Discussion of English and American dialects as they have grown from local conditions, industry, and sports, drew out personal experiences of pupils, in traveling, meeting visitors from outside, and reading "local-color" stories. This discussion took about a week, and from it we drew a broad basis for "better" and "worse" in usage, and learned, to some extent at least, to look upon the English class as the workshop where we should learn the usage of a broader, not a narrower community. The rules we must have later were justified because they would enable us to go with ease among more kinds of people. Pupils took notes, entered heartily into the general discussion, summarized facts for their notebooks, and at the end of the week had a written test in which all but two passed. Outside of class, enjoyment of the lessons was expressed. Even the lad who wrote "The English language underwent a change when the Mormons invaded England" had some faint illumination.

The next week, literature study in all classes began with Shakespeare, who furnished the best opportunity to notice, in passing, changing forms of language. It is odd, but we shun many things sooner for finding them old-fashioned than for finding them wrong.

Composition work began by forming a rough scale based on themes written on "How I Feel on the First Day of School," graded and arranged by committees of pupils. Upon this scale all students helped in rating one another's themes, thus forming some standards of judgment. Minimum essentials were decided upon, and a theme-record page and "never-again" page arranged for each notebook. On the theme-record page the number of errors in sentence division, spelling, verb form, apostrophes, concord, and question marks were to be recorded as soon as these matters had been made clear and drilled upon in class. Some of them were not counted till they were taken up in oral composition. From time to time quick tests in form were given at the beginning of the class period, and scored. It was a triumph some could not help sharing with all the rest of us, the first time they scored 100 on sentence division. Later, themes were sometimes criticized after being read aloud, and still later, by exchange, in which criticisms were written, pointing out definite defects and merits. Interest in spelling ran highest when we had baseball matches, with competing teams, and nine innings. As soon as the batters found that words from their own themes (kept in the catalogue which I had conquered) were pitched at them, instead of Popocatepetl, theme-record sheets were kept up, and the never-again page taken more seriously. Quick written spelling lessons connected this interest with writing habits.

Oral composition began with the first of "Ten Commandments for Oral English," which I had sanguinely thought achieved a minimum of dogmatism, and had hoped to have out of the way in ten weeks. I soon found them to be a decalogue of unattainable perfection, but they did realize a definiteness and simplicity which the previous year's work had so sadly lacked. There was only one new, small item at a time on which we must "watch our step." They included:

- I. Posture.
- II. Enunciation and tone. Poems of lyrical quality, with strong vowel sounds, were committed to memory by upper classes; younger classes had a tongue-twister contest.
- III. Correct use of the irregular verbs: *do, see, run, come*; past tense insisted upon, wherever it should naturally be used, to enforce practice in forms of the past, and to overcome confusion of sequence.
- IV. Three other irregular verbs: *write, eat, go*.
- V. Avoidance of double negative.
- VI. Concord of subject and predicate.
- VII. Mastering slovenly habits; pronouncing terminal *g*'s, the *o* in "for," and the *e* in "get."
- VIII. Substitutes for "and-a"; subordinate conjunctions in oral composition, with sentence division made clear.
- IX. Use of periods instead of question marks; making statements firmly, not doubtfully.
- X. Organization; a written outline to be handed in at each oral English period. Those who had not yet learned to *finish* their reports, instead of having them broken off by the time keeper, must do so. Later, and for certain kinds of topics, there was no time limit imposed.

The commandments were not perfect in order of arrangement, but enough of the work carried over from the year before so that reports were not wholly lacking in organization before the tenth commandment. The second gave us a start at articulation and tone; seven, eight, and nine returned to much the same difficulties, more definitely. Neither was the decalogue complete. Verbs less generally misused were corrected individually; prepositions were explained when misused in themes but were never made part of the minimum in oral English.

Violation of the decalogue gave a double grade, either in written or oral work, to be removed, at first, by original sentences which repeated the correct form. Later, the oral report must be repeated completely, in some cases the theme must be re-written completely, without the errors on which the offender had been tripped. The make-up parties were accepted with elastic good humor, and gave opportunity for the individual treatment necessary. A Freshman girl who had not sinned in class, explained to me, "I just come up while Marjorie wrote her sentences"; then at Marjorie's ironic demand for penance, sat down and wrote out twenty-five humorous sentences using "came"; and approached my desk the next few

times with her finger cautiously on her lips. Sam wrote, "I did study," "I did go," and twenty-three others of the same kind before I discovered him; and when I gave him "I did my lesson" as a sample, looked up with sleepy firmness to insist, "I done my lesson"! But before the first half of this second year was ended, he could plod through slow, painful reports, without any notes to help him, and not a single misused "come" or "done." Then one day when the year was three-fourths over, and an amiable-mannered gentleman engaged in a rural-school survey was visiting our third-year class, a boy said, "He seen"!

Some of those pupils may never learn to say "he saw" and "they did" with any ease. That is the pity of leaving corrections till so late. Some of them came to our high school from teachers who themselves used wrong verb forms habitually—high-school girls with perhaps not even a summer course at normal—and correct usage sounded odd in 90 per cent of the homes. It took all my courage and tact to answer the young son who asked me, in his mother's presence, whether the verb she had just used was not incorrect in form. But the children are usually least to blame for their habits, and once the ability to speak correctly became a felt need, they struggled courageously enough. There are snobs in the world, they understood, who would disparage their ideas if they wore celluloid collars or said "he done." And while we must not judge others by snobbish standards, so soon as we have opportunity for improvement, our own care or laziness in speech-habits becomes an expression of character, by which others are justified in judging us.

I was holding my breath most of the year for fear the decalogue might rob the composition of vitality. At the close of the term which was to end my work in that school, I asked once more for personal letters, frankly analyzing our work of the last two years, its benefits and demerits, its interests or dulness for them. The replies, though differing and disagreeing on most points, with almost no exceptions declared the oral work a benefit because of improvement in correct speech, growth in self-control, co-operation through the club organization used for all oral periods, and profit from the *content* used in oral reports.

One of the girls, writing on her final examination paper an answer about outside reading, said more graphically than she realized, "The book is a love story, and the expense is held to the very end." My two years' experience as a country schoolma'am was a true love story for me, for these children were my first loves as pupils. And though we found more sure paths for our feet the second year than the first, the sense of high adventure, for the teacher at least, was never lost.